

# How to Work With an Agitated Passenger

By Anne Lowder

*Practical tips for drivers in handling specific types of situations.*

**W**hether you are assisting a passenger into a transit vehicle or driving down the road to a scheduled destination, a passenger may become agitated. There may be just one factor contributing to this agitation, such as a passenger with dementia imagining he or she missed an appointment or obligation. Or there could be other reasons (or a combination of them) for the agitation such as the inability to communicate basic needs, strange surroundings, medical conditions that affect brain activity, or just wanting to be somewhere else.

Passengers who are agitated may refuse to board the vehicle, perform distracting behaviors during the ride such as moving from seat to seat, attempt to leave the vehicle while in motion, and be or become argumentative. As a driver, keep in mind that there are ways to deal effectively with the behavior of an agitated passenger, but the same method may not work each time. Be ready to try different approaches.

*Agitation and fear can be caused by any number of conditions, including some beyond a rider's control, like dementia and other medical conditions that affect brain activity.*

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## Transporting an agitated passenger

Customer management on the vehicle you drive is important. The majority of your passengers are most likely quiet, courteous, and easy to serve. Occasionally someone will present you with a problem, but the common denominator for transporting all your passengers is effective communication, which starts with remaining professional

and keeping calm, cool and focused. As a transportation operator, you are the leader establishing a level of communication that provides a quality ride for every passenger, including those who may be challenging.

A major barrier to effective communication can be our own tendencies to judge and then approve or disapprove of someone based on their actions or appearances alone.

A second barrier is allowing emotion to take over. No matter how badly your passenger behaves, as a professional driver it is your responsibility to remain calm. You must match what you say with how you say it.

## What are strategies for good communication?

There are several strategies that can help you get your message across in almost any situation, and these are particularly effective with working with someone with a cognitive impairment:

- Be calm, or at least attempt to appear calm.
- Try to put yourself in the person's situation. Imagine how he or she might be feeling or is trying to express.
- Use positive and helpful body language.
- Offer as much reassurance as you can.
- Give extra time for the passenger to respond.
- Speak directly and clearly. Use short sentences and simple, easy-to-understand words.
- Keep directions clear by explaining one step at a time.
- Provide accurate, honest

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information.

- Empathize. Try to put yourself in their place, and tell them that you can see their point of view.

- Use pictures and objects to illustrate your words. Point to your ID picture as you say who you are, point to any safety equipment as you speak about it. Anticipate what you need the passenger to do, and connect those tasks to other common events. For example, "By lunch time...." "By the time the sun goes down..."

### Heading off agitation

So what do you do if your passenger repeats the same gesture, asks the same question over and over, switches from seat to seat, tries to blame you for something you didn't do, or becomes paranoid that you are plotting against him or her? How about when someone sees objects or people that aren't there, or says things that simply don't make any sense? Is your reaction to try and bring the person back to reality? No, that strategy generally does not work.

Passengers who are agitated often have a cognitive disability such as dementia and are living in a different time than you or I. When they talk about people or places from the past, go along with

them instead of correcting them. This will help create a calming connection between you and your customer. Simply repeat back what they say and then ask them to tell you more about that person or place.

For example if your passenger becomes argumentative because he believes that he lives at a different house than where you are headed, it is often helpful to agree and act as if you are going along with his plan—even use it as a discussion topic—while you are proceeding to the original destination. This will help him use the parts of his brain that are still working and alleviate anxiety by allowing him to re-experience his memories. This is usually more effective than arguing with someone with dementia, as he may not have the ability to understand the reality of the situation even after many attempts on your part to explain things.

Validate your passenger's beliefs, which will result in more cooperation. Validation is empathy; however, empathy is not sympathy, confrontation or being patronizing. The chart below outlines some role-playing ideas using validation that handle some of the more difficult situations you may face as a driver.

**A**n agitated passenger will react more to nonverbal cues, such as tone of voice and your body language, than to the words you are saying. So when approaching an agitated passenger it is important to keep in mind personal space, body language and voice.

**Personal Space:** Invading a person's personal space can be thought of as a threat, especially if a person is already agitated. Look for clues from your passenger that you are invading this space, such as clenching of the fist or tightening of the facial muscles.

**Body Language:** Agitated people can feel threatened with a face-to-face confrontation. A better position is at a slight angle with 2 or 3 ft of distance between you and the passenger. Other parts of your body can deliver a mixed message such as clenching your own fist or frowning or scowling as you are delivering a calming message.

**Voice:** The meaning of a message can change with the tone and volume of the voice. It is true that some situations call for the need for you to raise your voice to get attention and response to your authority. Remember, though, that your voice and tone should never match the intensity of someone who is agitated or out of control. The better solution is to lower your voice; this distracts the person from their behavior and makes them listen.

### Summary

As a driver you have an important job to not only provide your customers with a safe and comfortable ride but also to provide positive customer service. Skill in working with agitated passengers is not as much a natural skill as one developed by practicing responding to potential situations, evaluating how a given situation evolved, and making changes to the

situation based on a desired outcome. The process must start with training in passenger assistance. Remember that working with agitated passengers is within your control; apply the various training tips to situations on your vehicle to find the tips that works best with each customer.

## Tips for Handling Specific Behaviors of Agitated Passengers

*Passenger Behavior . . . . . Why the Behavior is Occurring . . . . . Strategies to Work with the Behavior*

• Attempts to leave the vehicle, or being argumentative because of a belief that they should be going somewhere else.	Desire to meet obligations that don't (or no longer) exist.	Often helpful to agree and even use it as a discussion topic while you are proceeding to the planned destination. In other words validate the passenger's beliefs as opposed to re-orienting those beliefs.
• Agitated or resists entering the vehicle.	The agitation might have occurred before your arrival.	Allow the passenger to calm down; often a short walk will help in this process. Also a person may have forgotten how to enter the vehicle; patience and simple directions will help.
• Agitated behavior while riding.	The inability to communicate the need to use the rest room, or the environment of the vehicle, such as noise or temperature, is discomforting.	Be prepared with relaxing music, sunglasses, a piece of candy or a magazine to decrease the agitation through distraction. Another distraction is to start a conversation about your passenger's grandchildren or a hobby.